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ABSTRACT

Most major workplace literacy programs involve unions. Organized labor's current leadership in worker education and training is not a continuation of earlier activities but an expansion of union interest and activity that is unprecedented in the history of organized labor. These efforts do not rely on public funding, because many unions have negotiated financial support for the educational programs under the collective bargaining agreement. For decades, the building and construction trades have operated training programs funded through joint apprenticeship and training trusts with their contractors. Employers who have been reluctant to invest in their workers must commit the financial resources required to keep the skills of their workers current. They must embrace the cost of ongoing worker training and education as part of the total cost of doing business. Those who are planning a workplace literacy program should not oversimplify the literacy problem or what kinds of programs are needed and should not insult the workers they are hoping to serve through the program. The most important suggestion for these program planners is to involve unions and workers from the very start of the effort and throughout every phase of the operation as equal partners. (A list of 18 references and handouts are appended.)
(YLB)

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"A Labor Perspective on Basic Skills"

Presentation by
Tony Sarmiento, Assistant Director
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Conference on
"Workplace Basic Skills: A Labor-Management Approach"
Sponsored by
Columbus Area Labor Management Committee
Columbus, Ohio
September 28, 1989

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First, let me thank the Columbus Area Labor - Management Committee for inviting me to speak to you today. I would like to give special thanks to Bill Rittenhouse, Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the Columbus-Franklin County AFL-CIO and Co - Chair of the Committee. Ten years ago when I joined the HRDI staff, Bill and I worked together on a national demonstration youth employment program that included Columbus among its seven sites. Bill, along with John Hodges of the Ohio AFL-CIO, helped to make that program a success.

The planners of this conference have put together an impressive and exciting agenda. Like Paul Jurmo, I've attended countless meetings and conferences on workplace literacy in the last two or three years. But this conference today stands out for two reasons.

First, the speakers and presenters today are absolutely top-notch. Paul Jurmo, from whom you've just heard, represents an invaluable resource. He and the small handful of people who work for the Business Council for Effective Literacy act as a clearinghouse for unions as well as employers and educators about what enlightened employers are doing in regard to basic skills in the workplace. Their quarterly newsletter is well-written and extremely informative. For these reasons, I am very happy to share the podium for the first time with Paul.

Later this morning, you'll be hearing from Larry Mikulecky of Indiana University. I am familiar with many of the articles that Larry has written but had not met him until dinner last night. His research on different types of reading - reading to do, reading to learn, and reading to assess - have helped to clarify that the basic skills which a person is taught in school are not necessarily the same basic skills that are used most frequently on the job. The implications of his research on curriculum development and program design are profound.

Finally, I'd like to give special recognition to Rena Soifer of Eastern Michigan University, who will also be speaking to you later this morning. Rena will describe the UAW - Ford education program in Ypsilanti. That program's learner-centered approach - which involves appropriate use of personal computers and small group activities -- are

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particularly exemplary. Although I've worked with Deborah Young and other colleagues of Rena, I am also happy to meet Rena in person for the first time at this conference.

First Labor-Management Conference on Workplace Literacy

But in addition to the high caliber of the presenters, there's a second reason for my enthusiasm for today's conference: namely, today marks the first time that a workplace literacy conference has been devoted entirely to labor - management approaches. Earlier conferences have included one or two workshops or sessions on labor - management as part of a broader agenda. But no other conference that I can recall has ever focused entirely on how and why unions and their employers have worked together in this area.

This is especially significant when one recognizes that most -- if not all -- major workplace literacy programs involve unions.

Now you may be saying to yourself, "Of course he'd make that claim. After all, he works for the national AFL-CIO." Are we merely tooting our own horn?

Not at all, for all you have to do is look at the most frequently-cited studies and reports on workplace literacy programs. The Business Council for Effective Literacy's guide, or the American Society for Training Development's recent publications, or the Bottom Line, jointly published by the U. S. Departments of Education and Labor: all of these, plus numerous articles that have appeared in a variety of journals and periodicals, point to union-involved programs as the largest, oldest, most innovative, and most exemplary.

Unions Are Leaders in Workplace Literacy

Journalists have singled out the labor movement for its leadership in this area. For example, the **New York Times** published a lengthy article titled, "Help for Workers in a Complex World," on September 6 of this year. In its review of workplace literacy activities throughout the country, the **Times** article stated:

"Outside of government, some of the most aggressive drives for worker literacy come from the trade unions, which are pressing for education benefits for members."

This leadership is not new. Pushing for education and training has long been at the center of organized labor's history and tradition. **Time Magazine** reported in December 1988 -- in an article titled "The Literacy Gap" -- that "Some unions have been in the education business for decades."

Indeed, over fifty years ago, the building and construction trades unions established the first apprenticeship programs recognized by the Federal government under the Fitzgerald Act. Before that, the American Federation of Labor in 1918 was calling upon Congress to establish a Cabinet-level department that would given the responsibility for eliminating adult illiteracy. And even earlier, many unions were actively providing English-as-a-Second-Language classes to the thousands of new workers who comprised the waves of immigration at the turn of the century.

That **Time Magazine** article I described earlier quoted Kathy Schrier, director of the AFSCME District Council 37's Education Trust Fund. She stated:

"The [literacy] problem was always there. Business is just now waking up to it."

But organized labor's current leadership in worker education and training today isn't merely a continuation of our earlier activities. The programs that you'll be hearing about today represent an expansion of union interest and activity that is unprecedented in the history of organized labor.

For example, like those turn-of-the-century programs, unions today are providing English classes to immigrant workers, many of whom are currently in the process of gaining full citizenship status under the amnesty program started over a year ago. What's new is the scale of the program. For instance, the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor is currently operating the largest ESL program for immigrants in the entire state of California.

Other prominent and widely-known examples of expanded union initiatives are the programs established by unions with their employers in the manufacturing industries. Much has been written about the United Auto Workers contracts with the Big Three auto makers, which established joint education and training funds in 1982. The Communication Workers of America have a similar program with AT&T called the Alliance for Employee Growth and Development. And smaller unions such as the Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers have worked to establish educational programs for their members who work for Nabisco, Hershey Foods, or other employer, some prior to 1980.

Joint Educational Trusts Existed Long Before 1982

The funding mechanism for these efforts is also noteworthy, for they do not rely on public funding. Instead, many unions have negotiated financial support for the educational programs under the collective bargaining agreement. So in 1982, the UAW and the major car makers agreed that for every hour worked by an employee, five cents would be set aside for a jointly-administered education and training fund. This year, that formula is closer to nineteen cents for every hour worked. That means that instead of receiving a wage increase of nineteen cents per hour, UAW members voted to defer part of a larger pay raise to maintain and expand their educational programs.

Again, it's the enormous scale of the programs which began in 1982 with the UAW that's new in the labor movement, not the mechanism by which these educational programs are funded. For decades, the building and construction trades unions have operated training programs funded through joint apprenticeship and training trusts with their contractors.

Over twenty-five years ago, the Seafarers' union established a comprehensive training and education center at Piney Point, Maryland for all their members as a joint effort with their employers. In fact, their program is so comprehensive that any member of the Seafarers' union can obtain any education or training desired -- up to a four-year college degree -- at little or no personal cost to the individual member. Even if that member does not have their high school diploma, or is a total non-reader, the Seafarers' program has the staff and the resources to prepare that individual to graduate from college - if that is his or her personal ambition. All this is possible under the joint effort of the Seafarers union and their employers.

In the service industry, many unions have also negotiated training and educational trust funds. Nearly twenty years ago, the Hospital and Health Care Workers District 1199 in Philadelphia (now affiliated with AFSCME) established a program for health care workers. This year, with many hospitals and nursing homes scrambling to meet the new Federal law requiring nurses aides to be licensed, that program in Philadelphia is way ahead in preparing current workers in the industry to attain the basic skills required to pass the licensing exam.

The Service Employees International Union also has a number of education and training programs for their members in health care, clerical, and building service occupations. Many activities were launched under SEIU's Life-Long Education and Development (LEAD) program started in the 1970s.

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Also in the service industry, local affiliates of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union in Boston, New York, and Washington, D. C. have negotiated educational programs to prepare and upgrade their members' skills in the food and hospitality industry.

In the public sector, unions have also been able to establish educational trusts. Since 1971, AFSCME District Council 37 -- whose director I quoted earlier -- has been operating a comprehensive educational program in conjunction with the municipal government of New York City. At the union headquarters near Wall Street, union members are learning everything from basic skills to specific occupational skills that will help them on the job as well as prepare them to be better parents and citizens. Funded by the collective bargaining agreement, the union and the employer have agreed that it's in their common interest to enable, encourage, and support workers to achieve educational goals ranging from a GED to a college diploma.

Let me give one final example of a labor union initiative in this area of worker education and training. Just this past May, the United Steel Workers of America negotiated a new contract with the Bethlehem Steel Corporation. Under this ratified agreement, the union and company agreed to set aside for the next four years at least \$300,000 per month for a new educational program to supplement the training previously being provided to the workers. This totals over \$14.4 million to support educational programs for employees of a single company. This amount is larger than the entire annual budget of this year's national workplace literacy program of the U. S. Department of Education.

An excerpt from this collective bargaining agreement is especially noteworthy:

"In establishing this program, the United Steelworkers of America and Bethlehem are implementing a shared vision that workers must play a significant role in the design and development of their jobs, their training and education, and their working environment. In a world economy many changes are unforeseen and unpredictable. Corporate success, worker security and employee satisfaction all require that the workforce and individual workers be capable of reacting to change, challenge, and opportunity. This, in turn, requires ongoing training, education, and growth. Experience has shown that worker growth and development are stunted when programs are mandated from above but flourish in an atmosphere of voluntary participation in self-designed and self-directed training and education. These shared beliefs shall be the guiding principles of the United Steel Workers - Bethlehem Career Development Program."

Educators will certainly recognize the sound theoretical underpinnings reflected in this statement.

Over the last few years, Bethlehem Steel has faced numerous challenges to its economic survival. Would Bethlehem Steel have set aside \$14.4 million for the kind of educational and training program that I just described if it weren't an organized employer, if the Steelworkers had not pressed for and successfully negotiated for the kind of commitment and level of financial resources required?

Unions and Their Employers Are Beyond Rhetoric

So now you may begin to see why the most exciting and extensive activity in workplace literacy is in the unionized sector, where unions and their employers have found common ground and worked together on mutual interests. They have embraced the fact that raising workers' basic as well as technical skill levels -- if planned and structured properly -- can benefit the employer, the union, and the individual worker.

Unions and employers are working together to establish classes in reading, writing, and math that are only a part of a larger, more comprehensive program of upgrading, education, and training for all employees. And these extensive worker education and training programs are themselves directly tied to a broader joint union - management strategy that promotes job security and advancement.

There have been many calls for employers to make greater investments in their human resources -- their workers -- through basic skills education, training, and worker involvement programs. The report of the Commission on Workforce Quality and Labor Market Efficiency, which was issued just this past Labor Day, is merely one of several recent government studies that have made this appeal to the employers.

But when we look for employers' responses to this appeal beyond rhetoric, we find that most of the action that is taking place is where there is a collective bargaining relationship, where employees are represented by a union.

Why? Because the collective bargaining agreement provides two keys: money and structure. Let me briefly explain.

First, the collective bargaining agreement provides the financial support for workplace literacy. It serves as a stable and often sizable funding source not dependent on the fluctuations of government funding.

It's important to recall that these funds could have been distributed to the employees as part of a general wage increase. Instead, workers (through their unions) agreed to divert money that could have gone into their paycheck into a jointly-administered trust to support education and training activities. That shows a level of commitment that goes beyond rhetoric.

Second, the collective bargaining agreement provides the structure and framework for a genuine partnership to be established between an employer and its employees. The contract establishes the rules for discussing and resolving differences between managers and workers.

Workers know that literacy programs can potentially harm as well as help them. No employee will step forward to participate in a training program if revealing one's need for training might jeopardize one's job security or chances of advancement.

The collective bargaining agreement protects the rights of individual workers in regard to training and education as well as job safety, benefits, wages, and other areas. The contract and its grievance procedure are proven and effective safeguards. Individual workers don't have to rely solely on promises by their employer that participation in a literacy program will not hurt their careers. They have their union and the contract behind them.

Unions' and workers' experience with employee assistance programs provide valuable lessons about designing and operating workplace literacy programs as well. The dangers and pitfalls -- as well as the benefits -- are similar.

So with stable funding and a larger framework that incorporates the educational program into the workplace as a whole, is it no wonder that workplace literacy programs are flourishing in the unionized sector? They are firmly institutionalized. Thus, you find that worker education programs involving unions are not only serving the largest numbers of workers but also experimenting with the newest learning technologies and learning approaches.

Employers Don't Invest Enough in Worker Education

Let me contrast these joint labor - management education and training programs against what's occurring among employers in general in regard to their human resources development policies and practice. At a time of leveraged buyouts, multi-nationals, and

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conglomerates, many employers are reluctant to make any significant investments in their workers as well as physical facilities and equipment.

Many critics of corporate America -- not just organized labor -- are disturbed by their short-term view of the future. Quick profits are too often chosen over long-term competitiveness. Investments are made only if they guarantee a quick and immediate return. In this corporate climate, calls for employers to make increased investments in worker education and training are rarely heeded.

So from the workers' point of view, the direct and obvious impact of their employer's shortsightedness is that workers seldom receive any formal training from their employer. The scarcity of corporate investments in employee education and training was described recently in a study by the American Society for Training Development titled The Learning Enterprise, which was also funded by the U. S. Department of Labor. This report revealed that only 10% of all workers receives any kind of formal training on the job, and that most of those that get training are "managers and technical elites." It also reported that employers spend less than 1.5% of their total payroll costs on the education and training of their employees.

Paul Osterman of MIT's Sloan School of Management cited other studies in a paper that he presented to an Economic Policy Institute Seminar on Labor Market Policy in April 1988:

"Despite the widespread belief that private sector training is so extensive that it rivals the formal education system, available evidence suggests that employers underprovide training to blue-collar workers. According to a recent Conference Board study, only 18 percent of manufacturing firms provided non-exempt workers with training programs -- compared to the 33 percent who provided such programs for managerial employees and the 28 percent who offered programs to sales and marketing workers. Another survey, by the Bureau of National Affairs, provided similar but more startling results. Fully 60 percent of firms surveyed provided courses to managers, 50 percent to professional and technical workers, yet only 18 percent to nonexempt employees. Additional evidence on this point comes from a content analysis of training courses offered to firms by outside vendors. Only 14 percent of the more than 1500 courses surveyed claimed to serve other than clerical or managerial employees."

The labor market has also seen the growth of part-time employment. If you combine this trend of a growing contingent workforce with the employers' unwillingness

to provide training and education to their workers, how can you expect workers to keep up with changes in technology and other demands of a global economy?

Rhetoric is not enough. Employers must commit the financial resources required to keeping the skills of their workers current. They must embrace the cost of ongoing worker training and education as part of the total cost of doing business.

And again, these costs are genuine financial investments that provide a significant return. In fact, a study on productivity growth from 1929 to 1982 by Edward Denison found that increased worker education (26%) was second only to advances in knowledge (54%) among the factors that enhanced productivity during that 53-year period. In comparison, increases in machinery, plant and equipment contributed only 15% of productivity growth. And more part-time work actually decreased productivity (-13%).

So as you can see, organized labor's advocacy for expanded and ongoing worker education and training have strengthened employers as well as unions.

Specific Suggestions for Starting a Workplace Literacy Program

Let me wrap up by making a few specific suggestions for those who are planning a workplace literacy program. First, **don't oversimplify the literacy problem or what kinds of programs are needed.** [Refer to copies of overhead transparencies attached.]

It's helpful to keep in mind the principles that underlie successful programs like Rena Soifer's Reading Academy with the UAW - Ford Motor Company:

1. Build on what adult learners already know.
2. Teachers and learners are equal partners in the learning process.
3. Make the learning environment relevant and authentic in the eyes of the learner.

These principles may appear simple, but in practice they are often difficult to follow -- especially in the workplace setting. Employers must support the involvement of their employees in the planning and operation of a proposed workplace literacy program. In most instances, employers have been reluctant to sustain a participatory process in which hourly workers and managers are treated as equal partners to address **any** common concern. Again, genuine and effective worker participation is more likely to be found where a collective bargaining relationship exists.

Second, don't insult the workers that you are hoping to serve through your program. Poorly conceived and designed literacy programs can be anti-worker and anti-union.

A front cover headline from the August 1989 issue of the magazine **Personnel Administrator** declares in bold print, "27 Million Americans Cannot Read This. What can you do about it?"

This same number of "illiterate" Americans also shows up in an advertisement by the Ad Council Coalition for Literacy that regularly appears in magazines like **Business Week**. It states: "27 million Americans can't read. And guess who pays the price."

And a full page advertisement for Apple Computer declares that an even higher number of Americans -- 60 million -- are illiterate.

In contrast, Jump Start, the nationally-acclaimed report on adult literacy issued early this year, states:

"For the most part these are not people who are unable to read, write, compute, or solve everyday problems at all. They are not the entirely unskilled 'illiterates' who have received so much attention from the press. Relatively few Americans fall into that category: 3 - 4 million at most.... They constitute only a small part of the national problem."

So why are the number of "illiterate" Americans so varied? This is the subject of considerable debate among educators and policymakers alike. The debate involves difficult issues like defining what we mean by "literacy" and how it should be measured.

[An excellent report which tackles the complexity of defining and measuring literacy skills is Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults, by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It is probably the most comprehensive study of the literacy skills of a nationally-representative sample of young adults. Rather than employ standardized tests that establish grade-level scores, these researchers conducted interviews and asked 3,600 adults from 40,000 households throughout the country to perform real-life tasks that would reveal their reading, math, and other basic skills. Furthermore, the National Assessment declared:

"The complexity and diversity of literacy tasks in our society demand rejection of a simplistic single standard for literacy...There is no single measure or specific point on a scale that separates the 'literate' from the 'illiterate.'"]

So why is there such a disparity among the estimates of "illiterates" in the United States and an overly simplistic notion of literacy in the general media?

I would like to suggest that it's not unthinkable that these exaggerated numbers of so-called "illiterates" are part of the anti-worker (and anti-union) climate that exists today.

If the American public -- including our own members -- is led to believe that most American blue- or pink-collar workers don't even know how to read, then what right do American workers have to demand wage increases or better benefits? It's our own fault - workers and unions get blamed for our country's "lack of competitiveness," rather than our employers' failure to invest in keeping their workers' skills current.

In addition, exaggerating the extent and distorting the nature of the workplace literacy problem makes it more difficult for all efforts to raise workers' basic skills. The stigma of "illiteracy" is heightened. The many workers who can read but could benefit by improving their reading skills don't think that "literacy" programs are designed to help them ("I'm not an illiterate, I can read.") And those fewer workers who truly do not recognize letters and numbers are going to be less likely to step forward.

Let me give you another example of how the national debate about workplace literacy often reinforces negative stereotypes about blue-collar workers. That **Time Magazine** article titled "The Literacy Gap" which I described earlier was accompanied by a drawing that was atrocious.

The drawing above the headline of the article showed a lineup of the heads and shoulders of five blue-collar men wearing hardhats. The men are exactly identical except for their eyes. Three of the men's faces have letters instead of eyes. Two of the men have no eyes at all, but await their turn as a sixth man, obviously a professional employee wearing a white shirt and glasses, to draw a letter where each of their eyes should be. This drawing is accompanied by a smaller headline that states, "To close it (the literacy gap) -- and to open the eyes of millions of workers -- U. S. companies are spending hundreds of millions every year as educators of last resort."

Are blue-collar workers really that "illiterate?" Doesn't the drawing mislead us about the nature of the workplace literacy problem and its solutions? Doesn't it portray an image of adult workers that insults their dignity and individuality? Doesn't it represent the kind of one-way communication between managers and workers that is outdated and counterproductive?

So often, the contribution and skills of hourly workers is devalued not only by their employers but also by the mass media. Workers who "just work with their hands" are not given the same respect as those who "work with their heads." Often, only those who work with their hands truly understand that you need to use your head to work with your hands. Recognizing the dignity and value of all work is especially difficult when our culture promotes the college graduate and white collar worker as the exclusive model for success and status.

We should also reject the frequently-advanced notion that higher basic skills are now required because employment is shifting from manufacturing to service industries. First, many of the earlier manufacturing jobs required a high level of basic skills, and second, the manufacturing jobs of today and tomorrow demand different if now stronger basic skill levels.

So I urge you to recognize and build on the knowledge and skills of workers in the manufacturing and other industries when you plan a workplace literacy program. Don't insult them by assuming that they are unintelligent and unskilled -- even if they need to improve their reading, writing, and math skills.

Involving Workers As Equal Partners Is Critical to Program Success

My final and most important suggestion: **involve unions and workers from the very start of the effort and throughout every phase of the operation AS EQUAL PARTNERS.** This cannot be stressed enough. We in organized labor aren't alone in emphasizing the importance of involving workers. The American Society for Training and Development joins us.

According to ASTD, involving workers from the start is the only way that programs will succeed at all. As their study, Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want, warned:

"Sensitivity is important because the potential for misunderstanding is great. Employees need to be reassured that the [literacy program] will not result in loss of jobs. If they know what is going on and why, they are more likely to support the establishment of a training program. Without employee concurrence and cooperation, the Workplace Basics program will never leave the launching pad."

Once again, this indicates the critical significance of the collective bargaining agreement and labor-management relationship. It provides the structure for employee concurrence and cooperation as well as the adequate reassurance that job security is not at stake.

Workers have good reason to be cautious about participating in a literacy program or employee assistance program that is not endorsed by their union or designed in conjunction with the collective bargaining agreement.

But involving workers through their unions has an additional positive effect on the workplace literacy program: it helps to sharpen the focus of the proposed program. Since literacy encompasses such a huge body of skills and knowledge, it's necessary for the program's success to zero in on what the workers need to learn and what workers want to learn. Since they know the content of their jobs better than anyone else, workers can contribute to curriculum development as well.

Many hourly workers are likely to be excellent prospective instructors for the basic skills program. With training and support, these workers are experts on the job-related content and could serve a critical role in preparing co-workers in the basic skills as well. Experienced journeymen are often the best apprenticeship instructors in the building and metal trades. And given that only 10% of the American workforce receives formal training on the job from their employer, hourly workers are probably providing most of the training that occurs on the job today. We are already training each other. Why not tap this training expertise and experience among the hourly workers for a workplace literacy program?

It's also useful to refer to the recent ASTD study, Workplace Basics, which outlines the following seven basic skill groups that employers want in their employees:

1. The Foundation: Knowing How to Learn
2. Competence: Reading, Writing, and Computation
3. Communication: Listening and Oral Communication
4. Adaptability: Creative Thinking and Problem Solving
5. Personal Management: Self-Esteem, Goal Setting/Motivation, and Personal/Career Development
6. Group Effectiveness: Interpersonal Skills, Negotiation, and Teamwork
7. Influence: Organizational Effectiveness and Leadership

If we wish to establish a workplace literacy program that prepares workers in all the skills above, then involving workers in the process is critical. Let's not start with or

concentrate our effort exclusively on teaching workers the 3R's, or the basic skill group, "Competence: Reading, Writing, and Computation."

Instead, let's consider a process of workplace literacy program development and operation that addresses all seven basic skill groups comprehensively at the same time. Let's recognize that workers and adults do not develop these seven skills in any kind of order or sequence. In the workplace, the educational process and content cannot be separated.

In many ways, this kind of planning and implementation process is essentially what it means to have a sound collective bargaining or labor - management relationship. It assumes that workers -- regardless of their formal educational level -- bring knowledge and a perspective that is valuable in identifying and resolving problems faced by both the employer and its employees.

This can be accomplished by building on the workers' intimate knowledge of their job and their employer, and the skills that they have attained through work, personal, and community activities. Let's ask workers to use the problem-solving, communication, and group effectiveness skills that they already possess to develop an approach to the skills gap problem that may be affecting their employer and their co-workers. Let's use the collective bargaining relationship to address this workplace literacy issue in the same way that other issues of mutual interest and concern have been tackled.

By involving workers as equal partners in an effort of vital importance to the economic survival and growth of the enterprise, the dignity, self-respect, and self-esteem of workers are affirmed and raised. And increased self-esteem is likely to benefit both the union as well as the employer.

Let me close with a quote from Samuel Gompers from a speech he gave in 1916 to the National Education Association:

"The organized labor movement realizes that education is not an arbitrary thing that automatically ends with a certain year of life, but that it must continue throughout life if the individual is really to live and make progress... [Unions] ... realize that education is an attitude toward life -- an ability to see and understand problems and to utilize information and forces for the best solution of [life's] problems."

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Gompers' observation seventy-three years ago is even more true today, where the workplace demands that workers and employers respond to escalating and unanticipated changes. Unions know that they must continue to establish and maintain leadership in regard to worker education and training. The future of the American labor movement as well as the American economy depends on this continued leadership.

Thank you very much.

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27
million
Americans
can't read.
And guess
who pays
the price.

Every year, functional illiteracy costs American business billions.

But your company can fight back...by joining your local community's fight against illiteracy. Call the Coalition for Literacy at toll-free **1-800-228-8813** and find out how.

You may find it's the greatest cost-saving measure your company has ever taken.

**A literate
America is a
good investment.**



Coalition for Literacy

This ad is dedicated to the 60 million people who can't read it.

Unfortunately, an ad can't do much to solve this country's literacy problem.

So Apple Computer has dedicated something far more significant to the task—our Adult Education and Literacy group.

Simply put, this group's job is to help you and hundreds of other literacy providers make the most progress in the least amount of time. To do that, we're channeling our energies into three areas:

First, we're providing

educators with a comprehensive guide to Apple® II software that teaches adult literacy and basic skills. (Pick up your free guide in the Apple booth.)

Second, we're showing educators how they can use Apple HyperCard® software and Macintosh® computers to create new adult-training courseware—without a bit of programming experience. (Free HyperCard training sessions will be held in the Apple booth throughout the conference.)

And third, we're fostering

important new alliances among our friends in the software, literacy, and business communities.

Our goal is to give you the tools and support you need to wipe out illiteracy.

And our dream is to someday dedicate an ad to a nation of 250 million people who *can* read it.



The power to be your best.™

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The Literacy Gap

To close it—and to open the eyes of millions of workers—U.S. companies are spending hundreds of millions every year as educators of last resort

Anyone who has hired new employees or tried to retrain veterans is painfully aware of the problem. As much as a quarter of the American labor force—anywhere from 20 million to 27 million adults—lacks the basic reading, writing and math

in its gleaming eight-story Institute for Corporate Education in Hartford. Since 1982 the General Motors Truck and Bus Group plant in Flint Township, Mich., has offered its 3,000 workers high school classes and one-on-one tutoring in a cluster of rooms overlooking the shop floor

away from the workplace after hours. Larger companies, which command the resources to hold classes in-house, have sweetened the deal by offering workers time off during the workday to attend. Success in both cases depends on how strongly individual companies support

WORKPLACE BASIC SKILLS: A LABOR-MANAGEMENT APPROACH
Fawcett Center For Tomorrow

Thursday, September 28, 1989

AGENDA

- 7:45-8:30 Registration and Continental Breakfast**
- 8:30-8:45 Introductions of Sponsors and Conference Overview (Assembly Hall)**
Dave Patton-Labor Management Partnership Program
Harry Meek-Ohio Dept. of Education
Tom Kruglinski-Columbus Area Labor-Management Committee
- 8:45-9:45 Workplace Basic Skills: Labor and Management Perspectives (Assembly Hall)**
Paul Jurmo-Business Council for Effective Literacy
Tony Sarmiento-AFL-CIO HRD Institute
- 9:45-10:15 Break/Exhibits**
- 10:15-11:00 General Session: Workplace Basic Skills: Dimensions of the Challenge (Assembly Hall)**
Larry Mikulecky, Indiana University
- 11:00-12:00 Concurrent Sessions (Break-Out Rooms--To Be Announced)**
The Role of the Labor-Management Committee in Establishing a Literacy Program
Dave Patton-OSU Labor Management Partnership Program
Joyce Mallinak-Kalamazoo-OSU Labor Management Partnership Program
Tom Kruglinski-Columbus Area Labor-Management Committee
Steps in Setting Up An In-Plant Education Program
Rena Soifer-Eastern Michigan State University
Program Funding Options.
Garrett Murphy-Director, Continuing Education Programs, State of New York
Workplace-Based Training Materials
Larry Mikulecky-Indiana University
- 12:00-1:00 Lunch (Banquet Room--To Be Announced)**
Franklin Walter-Superintendent of Public Instruction, Ohio Department of Education
- 1:00-2:00 Concurrent Sessions (Repeat of Above)**
- 2:00-2:30 Break/Exhibits**
- 2:30-4:00 Panel Discussion: Labor-Management pairs discuss successful joint programs (Assembly Hall)**
Ford Ypsilanti Pair
Ehren Green, Salaried Personnel, Ford Ypsilanti Plant
Bob Bowen, Employee Involvement Coordinator-Ford Ypsilanti/UAW Local 849
Ohio Steel Tube Pair
Frank Burke, Human Resource Manager, Ohio Steel Tube Plant in Shelby, Ohio
Toney Stone, Coordinator/Trainer, Ohio Steel Tube Plant in Shelby, Ohio/USWA Local 3057
- 4:00-4:15 Wrap Up, Closing Remarks, and Conference Evaluation (Assembly Hall)**



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VOL. 6, NO. 9 September 1989

A MONTHLY UPDATE ON JOB TRAINING PARTNERSHIPS

Workplace Literacy And Workplace Politics

Involving workers is more important to launching a workplace literacy program than measuring their skill levels. Not only is it less likely to alienate the learners to be served by the program, but employee involvement is an absolute necessity in formulating a learner-centered approach and curriculum that meets the educational objectives of both management and workers. Active worker participation during the planning process — rather than a comprehensive literacy assessment — is one reason why programs involving unions are often described as exemplary models for all employers.

The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), in its report *Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want*, correctly emphasized that politics comes into play when establishing a workplace basics program. Success demands a genuine base of support and commitment from all levels of management and workers. Both salaried and hourly workers must believe that raising basic skill levels advances their own specific goals. For example, a manager might seek increased productivity, while an individual worker might desire increased job security and advancement opportunity.

But during the earliest stages of the planning effort — before a real consensus for a literacy program develops — what happens if a basic skills survey is made or even rumored? ASTD warns of the misunderstanding that is likely: "Employees need to be reassured that the investigation will not result in loss of jobs. If they know what is going on and why, they are more likely to support the establishment of a training

program. *Without employee concurrence and cooperation, the workplace basics program will never leave the launching pad.*" (emphasis added)

Overcoming Skepticism

In many companies where workers need educational upgrading, no verbal reassurance would be sufficient to convince employees that a literacy audit would not jeopardize their future, for management's past practice too often runs counter to letting workers "know what is going on and why" about anything affecting their jobs. What promises would you find reassuring if you could remember how your employer had laid off employees whose skills didn't measure up or you could not recall a single hourly worker who was ever given formal upgrade training by the company?

If launching a workplace basics program is a political process, then one must first investigate other critical factors before measuring workers' reading or writing skills. These factors include the company's overall financial condition and outlook, "corporate culture," and record of labor-management relations. Do downsizing, streamlining, and changes in ownership characterize its recent past and immediate future? What are the management styles and behaviors that typify the company's relationship with its employees? How open is the information-sharing and dialogue between supervisors and hourly workers? How have the management and union responded to earlier crises threatening the future of the enterprise? What have been the company's investment practices concern-

ing its human resources as well as physical facilities?

It is within this broader context of history and relationships that workers will view a literacy audit or job task analysis. As the most vulnerable participants in the proposed activity, many workers will be highly skeptical when they examine the employer's overall record and not merely the most recent promises. Based on their own firsthand knowledge of this larger context, workers will decide if the literacy audit is likely to lead to a literacy program or to literacy "triage" — a screening and evaluation process to identify for the employer who would be cost-effective to retrain and who should be let go.

Union Involvement

According to another ASTD report, *The Learning Enterprise*, "training and development is concentrated among white-collar and technical elites, with production and service delivery workers receiving much less training." Most workers know this based on their own work experience. Should it be surprising when workers have trouble believing that a company-sponsored literacy test will eventually help their own careers? Having the test administered by a collaborating educator provides little reassurance.

This apparent training pattern also helps to explain why most of the ex-

Employee Concerns: Are Literacy Surveys A Threat?

emplary workplace literacy programs reported in the literature involve unions. At companies with collective bargaining agreements, workers — through their unions — are empowered to act on their need and desire for keeping their skills current. With relatively few public dollars available to raise the basic skill levels among employed adults, many unions have successfully obtained sizable education and training funds for their members. As a result, union collective bargaining agreements are supporting the largest workplace literacy programs in the nation.

These major programs exist because organized labor and management were able to find common ground and establish an approach that met both the economic needs of the company and the career needs of the individual workers who needed upgrading. Both sides have intimate knowledge of day-to-day company operations and are aware of problems related to inadequate basic skills. As a result, they are often able to agree to establish basic skills programs without conducting a formal literacy audit. Only after the commitment is made by management and labor will further detailed studies be appropriate.

Thus, in the unionized sector, the collective bargaining agreement — the contract between the employer and its

employees — protects the job security and opportunity of workers who choose to participate in an educational survey or program. And participating workers trust that these protections are adequate because they fit into a much larger and well-established structure of advocacy and representation that comprises the labor-management relationship.

But just as important as these protections is the fact that through their union, workers are able to voice their ideas concerning the goals, content, and structure of a proposed education program. In contrast to a top-down, prescriptive approach, companies and unions recognize that worker involvement leads to more effective programs. The recently ratified contract between the United Steelworkers of America and Bethlehem Steel — which sets aside at least \$300,000 a month for a new Career Development Program — succinctly states: "Experience has shown that worker growth and development are stunted when programs are

mandated from above but flourish in an atmosphere of voluntary participation in self-designed and self-directed training and education."

Essential to learner-centered workplace literacy programs is the understanding that workers are capable and responsible for their own learning. As adults, they decide and act in their own best interest. They know more about their work and their industry and are required to exercise more judgement on the job than is generally recognized. It is more useful to solicit their ideas about education and training needs rather than to take measurements of skill proficiency or deficiency.

Some trainers and educators maintain that conducting a literacy audit or survey may help persuade an employer to establish a workplace basic skills program. Based on their considerable experience, many unions would suggest that such studies jeopardize rather than promote literacy initiatives. Why win the employer's support at the cost of forfeiting the trust of the prospective learners?

— Tony Sarmiento

Tony Sarmiento is an Assistant Director of the AFL-CIO Human Resources Development Institute in Washington, D. C. This article is based on remarks given at the Workforce Literacy Legislative Summit convened by the Congressional Sunbelt Caucus last April in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. HRDI will publish Worker-Centered Learning: A Union Guide to Workplace Literacy later this fall under a grant from the U. S. Department of Labor.
